

Maslow's Hierarchy: Understanding the Human Potential

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Abraham Harold Maslow was born April 1, 1908 in Brooklyn, New York. He was the first of seven children born to his parents, who themselves were uneducated Jewish immigrants from Russia. His parents, hoping for the best for their children in the new world, pushed him hard for academic success. Not surprisingly, he became very lonely as a boy, and found his refuge in books.

To satisfy his parents, he first studied law at the City College of New York (CCNY). After three semesters, he transferred to Cornell, and then back to CCNY. He married Bertha Goodman, his first cousin, against his parents wishes. Abe and Bertha went on to have two daughters.

He and Bertha moved to Wisconsin so that he could attend the University of Wisconsin. Here, he became interested in psychology, and his school work began to improve dramatically. He spent time there working with Harry Harlow, who is famous for his experiments with baby rhesus monkeys and attachment behavior.

He received his BA in 1930, his MA in 1931, and his PhD in 1934, all in psychology, all from the University of Wisconsin. A year after graduation, he returned to New York to work with E. L. Thorndike at Columbia, where Maslow became interested in research on human sexuality.

He began teaching full time at Brooklyn College. During this period of his life, he came into contact with the many European intellectuals that were immigrating to the US, and Brooklyn in particular, at that time -- people like Adler, Fromm, Horney, as well as several Gestalt and Freudian psychologists.

Maslow served as the chair of the psychology department at Brandeis from 1951 to 1969. While there he met Kurt Goldstein, who had originated the idea of self-actualization in his famous book, *The Organism* (1934). It was also here that he began his crusade for a humanistic psychology -- something ultimately much more important to him than his own theorizing.

He spend his final years in semi-retirement in California, until, on June 8 1970, he died of a heart attack after years of ill health.

Theory

One of the many interesting things Maslow noticed while he worked with monkeys early in his career, was that some needs take precedence over others. For example, if you are hungry and thirsty, you will tend to try to take care of the thirst first. After all, you can do without food for weeks, but you can only do without water for a couple of days! Thirst is a "stronger" need than hunger. Likewise, if you are very very thirsty, but someone has put a choke hold on you and you can't breathe, which is more important? The need to breathe, of course. On the other hand, sex is less powerful than any of these. Let's face it, you won't die if you don't get it!

Maslow took this idea and created his now famous hierarchy of needs. Beyond the details of air, water, food, and sex, he laid out five broader layers: the physiological needs, the needs for safety

and security, the needs for love and belonging, the needs for esteem, and the need to actualize the self, in that order.

The physiological needs. These include the needs we have for oxygen, water, protein, salt, sugar, calcium, and other minerals and vitamins. They also include the need to maintain a pH balance (getting too acidic or base will kill you) and temperature (98.6 or near to it). Also, there's the needs to be active, to rest, to sleep, to get rid of wastes (CO₂, sweat, urine, and feces), to avoid pain, and to have sex. Quite a collection! Maslow believed, and research supports him, that these are in fact individual needs, and that a lack of, say, vitamin C, will lead to a very specific hunger for things which have in the past provided that vitamin C -- e.g. orange juice. I guess the cravings that some pregnant women have, and the way in which babies eat the most foul tasting baby food, support the idea anecdotally.

The safety and security needs. When the physiological needs are largely taken care of, this second layer of needs comes into play. You will become increasingly interested in finding safe circumstances, stability, protection. You might develop a need for structure, for order, some limits. Looking at it negatively, you become concerned, not with needs like hunger and thirst, but with your fears and anxieties. In the ordinary American adult, this set of needs manifest themselves in the form of our urges to have a home in a safe neighborhood, a little job security and a nest egg, a good retirement plan and a bit of insurance, and so on.

The love and belonging needs. When physiological needs and safety needs are, by and large, taken care of, a third layer starts to show up. You begin to feel the need for friends, a sweetheart, children, affectionate relationships in general, even a sense of community. Looked at negatively, you become increasingly susceptible to loneliness and social anxieties. In our day-to-day life, we exhibit these needs in our desires to marry, have a family, be a part of a community, a member of a church, a brother in the fraternity, a part of a gang or a bowling club. It is also a part of what we look for in a career.

The esteem needs. Next, we begin to look for a little self-esteem. Maslow noted two versions of esteem needs, a lower one and a higher one. The lower one is the need for the respect of others, the need for status, fame, glory, recognition, attention, reputation, appreciation, dignity, even dominance. The higher form involves the need for self-respect, including such feelings as confidence, competence, achievement, mastery, independence, and freedom. Note that this is the "higher" form because, unlike the respect of others, once you have self-respect, it's a lot harder to lose! The negative version of these needs is low self-esteem and inferiority complexes. Maslow felt that Adler was really onto something when he proposed that these were at the roots of many, if not most, of our psychological problems. In modern countries, most of us have what we need in regard to our physiological and safety needs. We, more often than not, have quite a bit of love and belonging, too. It's a little respect that often seems so very hard to get!

All of the preceding four levels he calls deficit needs, or D-needs. If you don't have enough of something -- i.e. you have a deficit -- you feel the need. But if you get all you need, you feel nothing

at all! In other words, they cease to be motivating. As the old blues song goes, "you don't miss your water till your well runs dry!"

He also talks about these levels in terms of homeostasis. Homeostasis is the principle by which your furnace thermostat operates: When it gets too cold, it switches the heat on; When it gets too hot, it switches the heat off. In the same way, your body, when it lacks a certain substance, develops a hunger for it; When it gets enough of it, then the hunger stops. Maslow simply extends the homeostatic principle to needs, such as safety, belonging, and esteem, that we don't ordinarily think of in these terms.

Maslow sees all these needs as essentially survival needs. Even love and esteem are needed for the maintenance of health. He says we all have these needs built in to us genetically, like instincts. In fact, he calls them instinctoid -- instinct-like -- needs.

In terms of overall development, we move through these levels a bit like stages. As newborns, our focus (if not our entire set of needs) is on the physiological. Soon, we begin to recognize that we need to be safe. Soon after that, we crave attention and affection. A bit later, we look for self-esteem. Mind you, this is in the first couple of years!

Under stressful conditions, or when survival is threatened, we can "regress" to a lower need level. When your great career falls flat, you might seek out a little attention. When your family ups and leaves you, it seems that love is again all you ever wanted. When you face chapter eleven after a long and happy life, you suddenly can't think of anything except money.

These things can occur on a society-wide basis as well: When society suddenly flounders, people start clamoring for a strong leader to take over and make things right. When the bombs start falling, they look for safety. When the food stops coming into the stores, their needs become even more basic.

Maslow suggested that we can ask people for their "philosophy of the future" -- what would their ideal life or world be like -- and get significant information as to what needs they do or do not have covered.

If you have significant problems along your development -- a period of extreme insecurity or hunger as a child, or the loss of a family member through death or divorce, or significant neglect or abuse -- you may "fixate" on that set of needs for the rest of your life.

This is Maslow's understanding of neurosis. Perhaps you went through a war as a kid. Now you have everything your heart needs -- yet you still find yourself obsessing over having enough money and keeping the pantry well-stocked. Or perhaps your parents divorced when you were young. Now you have a wonderful spouse -- yet you get insanely jealous or worry constantly that they are going to leave you because you are not "good enough" for them. You get the picture.

Self-actualization

The last level is a bit different. Maslow has used a variety of terms to refer to this level: He has called it growth motivation (in contrast to deficit motivation), being needs (or B-needs, in contrast to D-needs), and self-actualization.

These are needs that do not involve balance or homeostasis. Once engaged, they continue to be felt. In fact, they are likely to become stronger as we "feed" them! They involve the continuous desire to fulfill potentials, to "be all that you can be." They are a matter of becoming the most complete, the fullest, "you" -- hence the term, self-actualization.

Now, in keeping with his theory up to this point, if you want to be truly self-actualizing, you need to have your lower needs taken care of, at least to a considerable extent. This makes sense: If you are hungry, you are scrambling to get food; If you are unsafe, you have to be continuously on guard; If you are isolated and unloved, you have to satisfy that need; If you have a low sense of self-esteem, you have to be defensive or compensate. When lower needs are unmet, you can't fully devote yourself to fulfilling your potentials.

It isn't surprising, then, the world being as difficult as it is, that only a small percentage of the world's population is truly, predominantly, self-actualizing. Maslow at one point suggested only about two percent!

The question becomes, of course, what exactly does Maslow mean by self-actualization. To answer that, we need to look at the kind of people he called self-actualizers. Fortunately, he did this for us, using a qualitative method called biographical analysis.

He began by picking out a group of people, some historical figures, some people he knew, whom he felt clearly met the standard of self-actualization. Included in this august group were Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jane Adams, William James, Albert Schweitzer, Benedict Spinoza, and Alduous Huxley, plus 12 unnamed people who were alive at the time Maslow did his research. He then looked at their biographies, writings, the acts and words of those he knew personally, and so on. From these sources, he developed a list of qualities that seemed characteristic of these people, as opposed to the great mass of us.

These people were reality-centered, which means they could differentiate what is fake and dishonest from what is real and genuine. They were problem-centered, meaning they treated life's difficulties as problems demanding solutions, not as personal troubles to be railed at or surrendered to. And they had a different perception of means and ends. They felt that the ends don't necessarily justify the means, that the means could be ends themselves, and that the means -- the journey -- was often more important than the ends.

The self-actualizers also had a different way of relating to others. First, they enjoyed solitude, and

were comfortable being alone. And they enjoyed deeper personal relations with a few close friends and family members, rather than more shallow relationships with many people.

They enjoyed autonomy, a relative independence from physical and social needs. And they resisted enculturation, that is, they were not susceptible to social pressure to be "well adjusted" or to "fit in" -- they were, in fact, nonconformists in the best sense.

They had an unhostile sense of humor -- preferring to joke at their own expense, or at the human condition, and never directing their humor at others. They had a quality he called acceptance of self and others, by which he meant that these people would be more likely to take you as you are than try to change you into what they thought you should be. This same acceptance applied to their attitudes towards themselves: If some quality of theirs wasn't harmful, they let it be, even enjoying it as a personal quirk. On the other hand, they were often strongly motivated to change negative qualities in themselves that could be changed. Along with this comes spontaneity and simplicity: They preferred being themselves rather than being pretentious or artificial. In fact, for all their nonconformity, he found that they tended to be conventional on the surface, just where less self-actualizing nonconformists tend to be the most dramatic.

Further, they had a sense of humility and respect towards others -- something Maslow also called democratic values -- meaning that they were open to ethnic and individual variety, even treasuring it. They had a quality Maslow called human kinship or *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* -- social interest, compassion, humanity. And this was accompanied by a strong ethics, which was spiritual but seldom conventionally religious in nature.

And these people had a certain freshness of appreciation, an ability to see things, even ordinary things, with wonder. Along with this comes their ability to be creative, inventive, and original. And, finally, these people tended to have more peak experiences than the average person. A peak experience is one that takes you out of yourself, that makes you feel very tiny, or very large, to some extent one with life or nature or God. It gives you a feeling of being a part of the infinite and the eternal. These experiences tend to leave their mark on a person, change them for the better, and many people actively seek them out. They are also called mystical experiences, and are an important part of many religious and philosophical traditions.

Maslow doesn't think that self-actualizers are perfect, of course. There were several flaws or imperfections he discovered along the way as well: First, they often suffered considerable anxiety and guilt -- but realistic anxiety and guilt, rather than misplaced or neurotic versions. Some of them were absentminded and overly kind. And finally, some of them had unexpected moments of ruthlessness, surgical coldness, and loss of humor.

Two other points he makes about these self-actualizers: Their values were "natural" and seemed to flow effortlessly from their personalities. And they appeared to transcend many of the dichotomies others accept as being undeniable, such as the differences between the spiritual and

the physical, the selfish and the unselfish, and the masculine and the feminine.

Metaneeds and metapathologies

Another way in which Maslow approach the problem of what is self-actualization is to talk about the special, driving needs (B-needs, of course) of the self-actualizers. They need the following in their lives in order to be happy:

Truth, rather than dishonesty.

Goodness, rather than evil.

Beauty, not ugliness or vulgarity.

Unity, wholeness, and transcendence of opposites, not arbitrariness or forced choices.

Aliveness, not deadness or the mechanization of life.

Uniqueness, not bland uniformity.

Perfection and necessity, not sloppiness, inconsistency, or accident.

Completion, rather than incompleteness.

Justice and order, not injustice and lawlessness.

Simplicity, not unnecessary complexity.

Richness, not environmental impoverishment.

Effortlessness, not strain.

Playfulness, not grim, humorless, drudgery.

Self-sufficiency, not dependency.

Meaningfulness, rather than senselessness.

At first glance, you might think that everyone obviously needs these. But think: If you are living through an economic depression or a war, or are living in a ghetto or in rural poverty, do you worry about these issues, or do you worry about getting enough to eat and a roof over your head? In fact, Maslow believes that much of the what is wrong with the world comes down to the fact that very few people really are interested in these values -- not because they are bad people, but because they haven't even had their basic needs taken care of!

When a self-actualizer doesn't get these needs fulfilled, they respond with metapathologies -- a list of problems as long as the list of metaneeds! Let me summarize it by saying that, when forced to live without these values, the self-actualizer develops depression, despair, disgust, alienation, and a degree of cynicism.

Maslow hoped that his efforts at describing the self-actualizing person would eventually lead to a "periodic table" of the kinds of qualities, problems, pathologies, and even solutions characteristic of higher levels of human potential. Over time, he devoted increasing attention, not to his own theory, but to humanistic psychology and the human potentials movement.

Toward the end of his life, he inaugurated what he called the fourth force in psychology: Freudian and other "depth" psychologies constituted the first force; Behaviorism was the second force; His own humanism, including the European existentialists, were the third force. The fourth force was the transpersonal psychologies which, taking their cue from Eastern philosophies, investigated such things as meditation, higher levels of consciousness, and even parapsychological phenomena. Perhaps the best known transpersonalist today is Ken Wilber, author of such books as *The Atman Project* and *The History of Everything*.

Discussion

Maslow has been a very inspirational figure in personality theories. In the 1960's in particular, people were tired of the reductionistic, mechanistic messages of the behaviorists and physiological psychologists. They were looking for meaning and purpose in their lives, even a higher, more mystical meaning. Maslow was one of the pioneers in that movement to bring the human being back into psychology, and the person back into personality!

At approximately the same time, another movement was getting underway, one inspired by some of the very things that turned Maslow off: computers and information processing, as well as very rationalistic theories such as Piaget's cognitive development theory and Noam Chomsky's linguistics. This, of course, became the cognitive movement in psychology. As the heyday of humanism appeared to lead to little more than drug abuse, astrology, and self indulgence, cognitivism provided the scientific ground students of psychology were yearning for.

But the message should not be lost: Psychology is, first and foremost, about people, real people in real lives, and not about computer models, statistical analyses, rat behavior, test scores, and laboratories.

Some criticism

The "big picture" aside, there are a few criticisms we might direct at Maslow's theory itself. The most common criticism concerns his methodology: Picking a small number of people that he himself declared self-actualizing, then reading about them or talking with them, and coming to conclusions about what self-actualization is in the first place does not sound like good science to many people.

In his defense, I should point out that he understood this, and thought of his work as simply pointing the way. He hoped that others would take up the cause and complete what he had begun in a more rigorous fashion. It is a curiosity that Maslow, the "father" of American humanism, began his career as a behaviorist with a strong physiological bent. He did indeed believe in science, and often grounded his ideas in biology. He only meant to broaden psychology to include the best in us, as well as the pathological!

Another criticism, a little harder to respond to, is that Maslow placed such constraints on self-actualization. First, Kurt Goldstein and Carl Rogers used the phrase to refer to what every living creature does: To try to grow, to become more, to fulfill its biological destiny. Maslow limits it to something only two percent of the human species achieves. And while Rogers felt that babies were the best examples of human self-actualization, Maslow saw it as something achieved only rarely by the young.

Another point is that he asks that we pretty much take care of our lower needs before self-actualization comes to the forefront. And yet we can find many examples of people who exhibited at very least aspects of self-actualization who were far from having their lower needs taken care of. Many of our best artists and authors, for example, suffered from poverty, bad upbringing, neuroses, and depression. Some could even be called psychotic! If you think about Galileo, who prayed for ideas that would sell, or Rembrandt, who could barely keep food on the table, or Toulouse Lautrec, whose body tormented him, or van Gogh, who, besides poor, wasn't quite right in the head, if you know what I mean... Weren't these people engaged in some form of self-actualization? The idea of artists and poets and philosophers (and psychologists!) being strange is so common because it has so much truth to it!

We also have the example of a number of people who were creative in some fashion even while in concentration camps. Trachtenberg, for example, developed a new way of doing arithmetic in a camp. Viktor Frankl developed his approach to therapy while in a camp. There are many more examples.

And there are examples of people who were creative when unknown, became successful only to stop being creative. Ernest Hemingway, if I'm not mistaken, is an example. Perhaps all these examples are exceptions, and the hierarchy of needs stands up well to the general trend. But the exceptions certainly do put some doubt into our minds.

I would like to suggest a variation on Maslow's theory that might help. If we take the idea of actualization as Goldstein and Rogers use it, i.e. as the "life force" that drives all creatures, we can also acknowledge that there are various things that interfere with the full effectiveness of that life force. If we are deprived of our basic physical needs, if we are living under threatening circumstances, if we are isolated from others, or if we have no confidence in our abilities, we may continue to survive, but it will not be as fulfilling a life as it could be. We will not be fully actualizing our potentials! We could even understand that there might be people that actualize despite deprivation! If we take the deficit needs as subtracting from actualization, and if we talk about full self-actualization rather than self-actualization as a separate category of need, Maslow's theory comes into line with other theories, and the exceptional people who succeed in the face of adversity can be seen as heroic rather than freakish aberrations.

I received the following email from Gareth Costello of Dublin, Ireland, which balances my

somewhat negative review of Maslow:

One mild criticism I would have is of your concluding assessment, where you appeal for a broader view of self-actualisation that could include subjects such as van Gogh and other hard-at-heel intellectual/creative giants. This appears to be based on a view that people like van Gogh, etc. were, by virtue of their enormous creativity, 'at least partly' self-actualised.

I favour Maslow's more narrow definition of self-actualisation and would not agree that self-actualisation equates with supreme self-expression. I suspect that self-actualisation is, often, a demotivating factor where artistic creativity is concerned, and that artists such as van Gogh thrived (artistically, if not in other respects) specifically in the absence of circumstances conducive to self-actualisation. Even financially successful artists (e.g. Stravinsky, who was famously good at looking after his financial affairs, as well as affairs of other kinds) do exhibit some of the non-self-actualised 'motivators' that you describe so well.

Self-actualisation implies an outwardness and openness that contrasts with the introspection that can be a pre-requisite for great artistic self-expression. Where scientists can look out at the world around them to find something of profound or universal significance, great artists usually look inside themselves to find something of personal significance - the universality of their work is important but secondary. It's interesting that Maslow seems to have concentrated on people concerned with the big-picture when defining self-actualisation. In Einstein, he selected a scientist who was striving for a theory of the entire physical universe. The philosophers and politicians he analysed were concerned with issues of great relevance to humanity.

This is not to belittle the value or importance of the 'small-picture' - society needs splitters as well as lumpers. But while self-actualisation may be synonymous with psychological balance and health, it does not necessarily lead to professional or creative brilliance in all fields. In some instances, it may remove the driving force that leads people to excel -- art being the classic example. So I don't agree that the scope of self-actualisation should be extended to include people who may well have been brilliant, but who were also quite possibly damaged, unrounded or unhappy human beings.

If I had the opportunity to chose between brilliance (alone) or self-actualisation (alone) for my children, I would go for the latter!

Gareth makes some very good points!

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